

Riverton December meeting about 2016 seasons

Group discussions focused on the Mule Deer Working Group's split limited quota and other season recommendations.

Group 1.

Overall in support because it would reduce crowding and harvest

Pros:

- Less crowding
- Type 9 will take pressure off rifle season
- Continued youth opportunity
- Eliminates need for APEs (decrease in violations)
- Maximizes WTD opportunity
- Allows for management adjustment
- 3 year trial (no commitments yet)

Cons:

- Unknown quota = potentially too many hunters total
- Increased pressure in other remaining GEN areas
- With current recommendations, places youths with all other hunters
- LQ "death spiral" ratcheting down quota to very minimal numbers
- With LQ someone is not going to draw a tag (ability to hunt every year in familiar areas)

Other Thoughts:

- Would like to see rest period between 2 seasons

This isn't needed if we don't implement split limited quota seasons.

- Think about swapping deer/elk dates (specifically Sweetwater HU)

We are proposing to continue with the traditional elk and deer opening dates in the Sweetwater Deer Herd and Green Mountain Elk Herd.

- Deer area 36 season structure in mind

- Elk Area 128 is over harvested relative to the population - too much harassment

Although Elk HA 128 does receive a fair amount of hunting pressure due to it being a General License Area, the actual harvest in Elk HA 128 was not significant in 2015, especially with the limitation that hunters could only take antlered elk in October. The Green Mountain Elk Herd Unit (Hunt Areas 24, 128) is slightly over the 500 elk objective, so we are proposing to increase the Type 5 licenses by 25 for 2016. We are proposing to only allow Elk HA 24 Type 1 and Type 4 hunters to hunt in HA 24 so the perception of crowding in HA 128 and overharvest will hopefully be reduced in 2016.

-Poor hunter ethics in HA 128 general season

We will continue to follow up with complaints about hunter conduct during the 2016 season. Reports of malicious activity/wildlife violations from other hunters in the field will be instrumental in effectively addressing these concerns.

Hopefully, with Antlered Only General season again in 2016, there will be fewer hunters and they will be less problematic. Report violations to:

Stop Poaching Hotline

1-877-WGFD-TIP (1-877-943-3847)

-Conflicts with overlapping deer season - increased stress on mule deer

-November 24/128 error was unacceptable

We agree! The result of hunting bulls in November was seemingly inconsequential as only 4 more bulls were reported harvested in the 2015 season compared to the 2014 season. Nonetheless this was an error in the 2015 hunting regulations that we are proposing to correct for the 2016 season. In Elk HA 24 we are proposing that unused Type 1 licenses will be valid for harvest of antlerless elk only in November.

-Too many wild horses

We agree, and have supported BLM in planned horse gathers, but funding issues have prevented them from being implemented. We will continue to support horse management within BLM's designated Appropriate Management Levels.

-Observed increase in paired coyotes

-Need to allow G&F to be funded partially through general fund

-Federal government should pay for those spp under their control (wolves, grizzlies)

-Disagree with Game Wardens being tasked with ATV enforcement

-Landowners who receive landowner licenses should be required to hunt on their deeded land only

-Continue public access programs (and appreciate what access we have)

Group 2.

Overall in support because it'll be a better quality hunt and something needs to be done.

Pros:

-3 year trial period

-Keep kids hunting

-Would reduce crowding

-Reduces nonresident tags

Cons:

-Family might not be able to hunt together

-Triples hunting pressure on deer with longer season

- LQ areas don't go back to general
- Increase use of other general areas in state

Other Thoughts:

- Hunting pressure on WT deer should be maintained
- Don't want Type 9s to reduce regular archery opportunity into the future

The working group's recommendation for Type 9 was NOT a "choose your weapon" proposal, but would have been in addition to traditional archery seasons for those areas.

This also isn't needed if we don't implement split limited quota seasons.

- Concerns about not being able to draw a tag on the Wind River
- Do not want resident preference points

Group 3.

Overall in support

Pros:

- Minimizes hunter impact
- Consider a break between splits - calm the deer
- Limit number of hunters enhances enforcement
- Decreased competition between hunters
- Attract a more ethical hunter
- Increased compliance with laws
- 3 year trial - allow return to general
- Maintain youth opportunity
- Limit nonresident pressure

Cons:

- Limits hunting opportunity. Some aren't going to draw
- Like Colorado limiting their individuals' opportunities only with regard Type 9
- Domino effect - hunter displacement and pressure to other areas
- Impact WGFD revenue where's the difference going to come from
- Increased emphasis on WT deer management and harvest. Add additional licenses.

Other Thoughts:

- Need follow through if implemented
- Increased Game and Fish presence
- 2015 seasons
 - Elk

too many wolves in East Fork of the Wind - no elk

area 28 should be any elk all season - saves some bulls

Due to concerns about increasing hunter numbers, we chose to only have Any Elk valid for the first "week", then Antlered only the remainder of the season. We think this did reduce pressure on bulls, and since the population is at objective, we don't need to increase cow harvest too much. Also, the "Date of Harvest" survey results showed the majority of elk harvest in Area 28 occurred

in the first 9 days of the season, indicating harvest levels may increase substantially if the Any Elk season was extended.

area 33 damage hunt - no elk be cautious with damage

-Antelope

too many bucks in HA 66

There are a good number of young (1-2 year old) bucks, but not as many older bucks as we would like. Conservative seasons for 2016 should allow increase in adult buck ratio in all hunt areas.

not enough bucks in HA 97

couldn't draw

need more licenses

could consider "buck only" tags

Almost all Type 1 antelope harvests are bucks, so there is no need for this change.

-Deer

not enough bucks in HA 157

can consider an additional WT license

Group 4.

Overall support unknown

Pros:

- Not as many hunters per each season
- LQ should increase opportunity for harvest
- Increase quality of hunt

Cons:

- Cut season length would reduce time working people hunt (weekends)
- Hunting pressure may still be high on open day/weekend
- Having youth season overlap with LQ wouldn't give youth "solo" opportunity

Other Thoughts:

- Did the any elk season accomplish desired result

We believe it did. Harvest surveys indicated a 14% increase in hunter numbers in 2015, (which was less than expected) and an increase in antlerless harvest, and seemed to put less pressure on adult bulls and increased spike harvest, hopefully leading to improved bull quality over time.

- Want to completely separate 25 and 27 elk seasons and increase license numbers

They are separated again for Type 4 season in 2016, but Type 1 hunters will be allowed to hunt both areas. Unsure if this will accomplish the desired result of increasing drawing odds for Area 27. There is no need to increase license numbers & harvest in either area, since the population is at objective.

- Area 27 elk extend to Nov 30

- Open Bear HA 13 on Aug 15

-Very LQ late season, mule deer

Game and Fish responses

A principal basis for creation of the Lander/Green Mountain Mule Deer Initiative was to collaboratively develop strategies to improve mule deer populations and mule deer hunting opportunity in the South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units. As the Working Group met, they gathered information about mule deer ecology, mule deer populations, habitats, past hunting seasons, and many other issues impacting mule deer in these herd units. In August 2015, the working group presented WGFD with mule deer management recommendations, including several recommended changes to the existing hunting season structure. The hunting season structure recommendations were presented to the public in December 2015, following extensive outreach during fall 2015.

The Working Group's primary goal for recommended changes to hunting season structure was to "Balance Hunting Opportunity with Reduced Hunter Crowding." Input received at a workshop held in April 2014, as well as responses to an initial hunter survey regarding these herd units indicated hunters were concerned about increasing hunter densities and decreasing quality of their hunting experience.

To address this goal the Working Group recommended a split limited-quota season structure for both herd units, a Type 9 archery only license valid for all five deer hunt areas, and continued General Deer Youth license any deer seasons. In fall 2015, the Working Group and WGFD embarked on an extensive outreach effort to engage the public and gauge their responsiveness on these recommended changes. A survey was developed and mailed to hunters in the Lander, Riverton, Jeffrey City, and Casper areas known to hunt mule deer in the South Wind River and/or the Sweetwater herd unit. The survey was also distributed during WGFD field contacts/game check stations and by email.

Approximately 1,900 contacts were made to solicit survey responses from those who hunt in these areas. Of the 217 responses received, 92 (42%) supported the recommendations, 82 (38%) did not support the recommendations and 43 (20%) partially supported the recommendations (Figure 1).

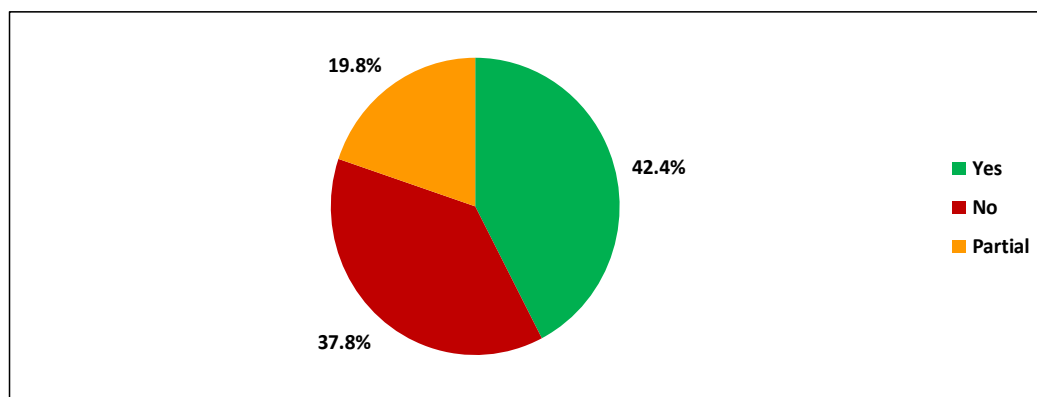


Figure 1. Survey results for the Lander/Green Mountain Mule Deer Working Group's recommendations to implement split limited-quota seasons, a type 9 archery license, and maintain General Deer Youth License any deer seasons.

"Partial support" was selected by 43 individuals when they only supported portions of the recommendations. Of those 43 responses, 24 supported limited-quota license seasons and 17 did not (for two responses, it was unclear whether or not they supported limited-quota license seasons and are not included in any further analyses). When assimilating these responses back into the survey as a whole,

overall support for the limited-quota license season structure recommendation was almost evenly split with 116 (54%) in support and 99 (46%) in opposition (Figure 2).

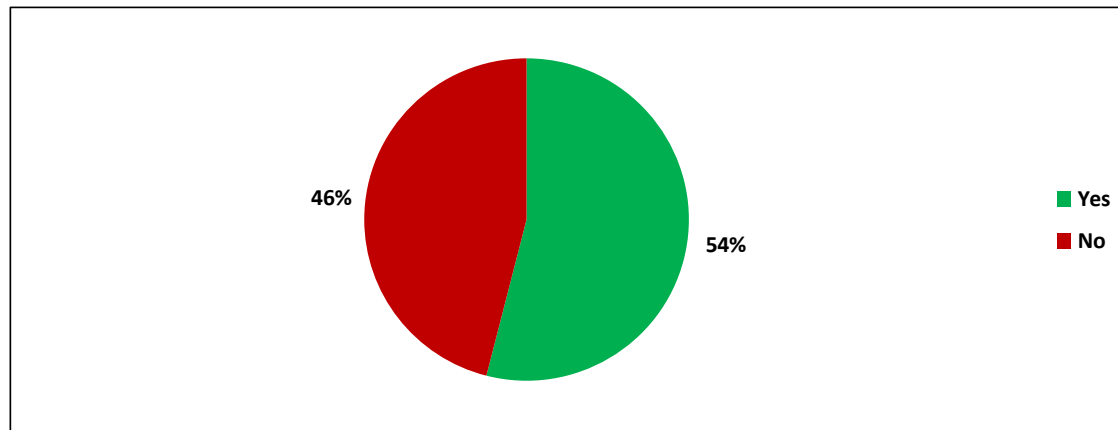


Figure 2. Survey results for the Lander/Green Mountain Mule Deer Working Group's recommendation to implement split limited-quota license seasons.

The Working Group also presented their recommendations at WGFD post-season public meetings in Lander and Riverton in late-November and early-December, 2015. WGFD personnel presented the Working Group's recommendations in Rawlins and Casper. Overall, public input received at these meetings mirror that from the survey. Some supported the limited-quota license season recommendation and some didn't. There was general support in Lander and Riverton and, in contrast, opposition in Rawlins and Casper.

Based on survey data, along with input received at the public meetings and WGFD field contacts it is clear there is not over-whelming support to implement limited-quota license seasons in these herd units. Perhaps most importantly, a good number of people who were either contacted or filled out the survey continue to misunderstand the reason limited-quota license seasons were recommended. Many incorrectly assume limited-quota license seasons will increase mule deer numbers and thus tended to support the idea. Regardless, there remains a lot of confusion among the public what limited-quota license seasons will do, what they won't do, and how they will or will not affect hunting opportunity.

A. Balance Hunting Opportunity with Reduced Hunter Crowding

- *WGFD is not recommending implementation of limited-quota license mule deer seasons in the South Wind River or the Sweetwater herd units at this time for these reasons:*
 1. There simply is not enough support to shift to a limited-quota license season structure to address hunter crowding. It is clear hunter crowding, while a continued concern for some, is no longer a major concern for many.
 2. There remains a significant amount of confusion and misunderstanding the effect limited-quota license seasons will have on mule deer populations and hunting opportunity. It is WGFD's perspective based on the survey and public input that many who support limited-quota license seasons simply do so because they believe it will result in increased numbers of mule deer in these herd units. Limited-quota license seasons will **not** bring mule deer back. As such, it would be a disservice to the public and to the resource for WGFD to unnecessarily restrict hunting opportunity. WGFD will continue to evaluate the need for implementing a

limited-quota license structure in these herd units if and when the circumstances described in the “Hunting Season Structure” section change.

3. The mule deer populations have increased the past two years in both herd units and, correspondingly, there are increased numbers of bucks available for harvest. This is likely alleviating complaints.
 4. Because limited-quota license seasons in these herd units would have far reaching statewide implications, WGFD needs to consider those implications and other options (i.e., “resident regions”).
- The Working Group favored the statewide “resident region” concept to any other season structure including the split limited-quota license season recommendation. But, because the resident region concept would require change statewide, the Working Group focused on management in the South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units. The Lander Region will request Wildlife Division and Department administration re-examine the “resident region” concept for statewide implementation.
 - WGFD will carry forward the working group’s recommendation regarding opening dates for white-tailed deer seasons under the existing Type 3 (Any White-tailed Deer) and Type 8 (Doe or fawn White-tailed Deer) license structure. The proposed opening dates of October 1 for these license types in Deer Hunt Areas 92, 94, 160 and October 15 in Deer Hunt Area 97, will be presented via the standard 2016 season setting process, and if supported by the public, will be implemented in the 2016 seasons.
 - WGFD will continue to propose General License seasons for youth hunters in each herd unit during the 2016 season setting process.
 - *The Type 9 archery-only license recommendation is a component of the limited-quota license recommendation and is unnecessary in the absence of limited-quota license seasons.*
 - WGFD will continue to consider how timing of deer hunting seasons may impact hunting for other species (and vice versa), with regard to hunter crowding and influence on harvest. This is particularly important in the South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units with respect to deer and elk hunting overlap, and which current seasons are designed to minimize conflicts.